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OPINION

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TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH . . .

GAURI DESHPANDE

THESE are the last few weeks of my stay here, and I would probably not have time to write another 'letter' before I am back, so let me crowd the last few paragraphs in this one. First of all, I find myself looking forward to coming home. I remember, during such leave-taking periods in the past, my emotions were entirely mixed. Happiness at the thought of seeing all of you soon was almost equally mixed with sadness at leaving a bunch of new friends, a pretty country, a few of the good things of life which are beyond my means at home; and even with a reluctance to face all the responsibilities of being at home from which a sojourn abroad is a holiday. This time, however, there is very little regret. In spite of all its prettiness, its affluence, its well-ordered and smooth-running life, I feel no hesitation at leaving this country. I find that I am not at all happy to live a life that runs so without trouble and excitement. I mean where is the wildcat strike of the BEST drivers that leaves me stranded miles from home with only my feet as a means of transport ? (For generally taxis and railways have also gone on a sympathetic strike at the same time.) Where are the sudden shortages that make me stretch my ingenuity ? Where are the fascinating street brawls that can while away a good half an hour of my time and may even, if luck holds, blossom into full-fledged "tense situations between two communities" ? And where, oh where are the juicy scandals involving chief and prime ministers which put the oomph into my morning coffee ? This is a dull place I tell you, where the arriving of the plum blossoms is an item of front-page news !

We did have two front-page tragedies last week, right on top of one another. One was a hotel fire that killed 32 people, and another a Japan Airlines crash that resulted in the death of twenty-four people. Of course, the loss of life was shocking and regrettable, but what was really fascinating was the behaviour of the Japanese people vis-a-vis these accidents. It transpired that the owner of the hotel (which was running at a loss) had taken absolutely *no* precautions against fire-hazards. The alarms were not working, the sprinkler system was a dummy, there were no humidifiers in the hotel so that everything was tinder-dry, there were no responsible night-personnel on duty and some of the floors did not even have emergency exits. All this became obvious within the first hour after the fire had started, and it took the

Tokyo Metropolitan Fire Brigades close on eight hours to get it under control. Then the charade began. In any other country the owner would have been jailed for criminal negligence, sued right, left and centre by those who lost relatives or property or peace of mind through that fire and the municipal officers who allowed this hotel to operate would have been investigated, dismissed or charge-sheeted . . . and so on. Not here. What happened here is this. First of all, the hotel owner apologised, thereby apparently satisfying everybody's sense of what is proper for a hotel owner in such circumstances to do; then he promised compensation (what is he going to pay the compensation with if he was too bankrupt to look after his hotel?), so nobody is going to take him to the cleaners; and finally and touchingly, he said that he feels truly sorry for thinking only of money and not of the welfare of his guests. After a couple of indignant Letters to the Editor, complaining about Tokyo's lax fire laws (and there was one letter which even took the hotel-keeper's side and suggested that he had trusted his guests and they had in turn let him down by smoking in bed — though there is no way of telling how the fire started), the whole episode is closed.

The story of the JAL DC 9's plunge into Tokyo Bay a kilometre short of its runway on Haneda Airport is even more bizarre. There too, within an hour of the accident (just as the first batch of evacuees from the nose section of the plane reached the first of the on-the-scene reporters), the cause of it was perfectly plain: pilot negligence. Instead of coming down smoothly for a normal landing, the chief pilot, upon switching controls from automatic to manual had simply reversed both engines for no earthly reason that anyone could see. The co-pilot, realising that something was seriously wrong, tried to correct the error, but the plane was too close to the ground (or rather water) for his manoeuvres to take any effect. And guess who was the first off the plane and in the first batch of evacuees, as large as life in all the press photographs? The chief pilot, no less. (In spite of this, the JAL office issued statements to the effect that the pilot was too badly injured to be able to say anything.) It came out within fifteen minutes of a reporter getting anywhere near the engineer or the co-pilot that the captain had had a year-long history of serious psychological illnesses, characterised by persecution complexes, fatigue, irrational behaviour and stress-induced ailments, including blackouts. The report of this medical history had simply not been sent by the JAL medical staff to the civil aviation ministry, which insists on getting bi-annual medical clearances for all flying personnel and ground support crew. Now, you would expect a tremendous hue and cry against the flag-carrying airline, but there is nothing of the sort. Of course, the president of JAL went personally to the home of each victim and apologised to the next-of-kin and promised compensation, and that is that. What will happen to the insane pilot or the greedy hotel owner? The people I asked seemed to think that nothing much is likely to happen to either. The one will go to a hospital, and the other will pay a fine and compensations. Everything will be settled out of court, so there is no danger of anything detrimental to

JAL or to the Tokyo Metropolitan Fire Board coming out in the open. Oh, everyone says that something is really wrong with a Fire Board which allows such hotels to operate, or with an airline which allows crazy pilots to fly planes, but then, everyone *did* apologise, and agree to pay the right compensation and said they were sorry, didn't they? So let's leave it at that. What is the point in calling a spade a spade, after all? Even when you call it an excavating implement, everyone knows what you are talking about, so why be crude and forthright?

Anyone not born and brought up a Japanese, is incapable of understanding these complex, convoluted and confusing patterns of behaviour that make up the Japanese public ethic. For instance, you will not find anything like a mandatory sentence for any crime. Like the compensation, the punishments too, can be negotiated. Take an embezzlement, for example. The sentence will depend upon whether the guilty party is contrite (apologises profusely and 'sincerely' to the injured party), is willing to make restitution, can be shown to have been acting under the influence of a 'bad' or authoritative person, and so on. If, for instance, the guilty party is sufficiently aged, sufficiently repentant, sufficiently prominent and can be shown to have been acting in the best interests of a boss or a company, he may even get away with a commuted sentence and a fine; as did a number of important political and industrial figures in the so-celebrated case of Tanaka-Lockheed-All Nippon.

Again, equally baffling is the dichotomy within the psyche of an individual Japanese. As a private person, he will not tell a lie, cheat you out of even ten yen, will shudder at the very thought of chicanery and malpractices. Make him into a corporate individual, and he will cheerfully offer and take bribes without the least compunction and quite often with an amazing air of righteousness, as though to do such a thing for the corporate good were not only excusable but even laudable! An acquaintance once said sorrowfully while in his cups that it is a good two decades since he had occasion to recognise that truth and falsehood are, after all, absolute values. Over twentyfive years of living as a corporate being, he now recognises only an "XYZ Corporation truth" and an "XYZ Corporation lies". And it is schisms of this sort that lead to the tragedies mentioned above. The individual doctors working for JAL would not have told lies to anyone in their private capacity, but as employees of JAL, they almost felt it to be their duty to suppress the fact of a pilot's serious illness. After all, hadn't JAL spent oodles of money on his training? How could they be made to suffer the loss of it all through grounding him? And were they not paying the medical staff handsome salaries, bonuses, and other goodies? Besides, the pilot was not all *that* sick, and the medical staff *would* look after him and see to it that he didn't do anything foolish (it seems for about a year a qualified doctor used to fly with this pilot!), so where's the harm in a little lie, a little *suppressio veri*? Don't they *owe* it to JAL to do at least this much? Surely they do! The result: the loss of twentyfour lives that could certainly have been avoided.

As I was explaining to a friend, it is because of this personal experience of truthfulness, that one tends to forget to be wary, and one is reluctant to believe that these same truthful persons will and most probably do lie when they speak as members or representatives of Corporations, Governments, or other large and important bodies. It is on account of the almost universal trustworthiness of the Japanese as private individuals that most people will not question their veracity when they act as members of a group and this can lead to a saddening, tragic breach of faith. This is not to say, of course, that recognising this division between the private and corporate morality of a Japanese would lead people to shun all air-travel, or to some such equivalent acts. It might, however, lead to a much stronger demand for personal integrity in all areas of life. If social approval is taken away from blind and unquestioning obedience to the demands made upon one by one's superiors and employers, then perhaps the sad and disillusioning division in the Japanese mind can come closer to being healed.

And so to come back to where I began, I *am* looking forward to coming home to my 'undivided' countrymen, whose psyche, generally speaking, is wholly of a piece, that is to say, alas, wholly unreliable and untrustworthy in both their private and corporate personae! But at any rate this attribute of theirs keeps me continuously on my toes; and alertly examining every potato in the kilo or so that I may be able to afford every other week. There, I have learnt not to trust *anyone*. I go around assuming that every soul is out to cheat me, and it is up to me to take the necessary precautions. You won't catch me getting on an airplane; and if it were absolutely necessary for me to do so, I would personally go and interview the captain and then never take off the life jacket. There, all my calculations would be thrown out of kilter if people suddenly started to tell me the truth for I assume that truth is something I can get at only after a great deal of scrupulous investigation, minute examination of various facts, comparative studies of myriad aspects of any statement, division of every figure by a hundred (if it is favourable to the speaker) or the multiplying of it by a thousand (if it is detrimental to who-or-whatever the spokesman represents). You see now why I find life so absorbing at hom[illegible] minute of every day so exciting? Well, cheers, an[illegible], Bengal

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